

## ***Sacramento Bee***

### **Legal hotline for seniors loses grant, won't expand**

**By Nancy Weaver Teichert**

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The loss of a federal grant has stymied plans for the Senior Legal Hotline to expand its free legal services statewide.

The hotline lost out on a grant from the federal Administration on Aging, which would have provided \$175,000 a year for the next three years.

David Mandel, supervising attorney, protested to federal officials about the way the hotline's grant application had been evaluated. He said a package of 20 letters of support failed to reach some of the judges.

The hotline, which is part of Legal Services of Northern California, was the only California application from 24 submitted nationwide for \$1.5 million in grants. "It was because of a screw-up in Washington that California is losing having a program like this," said Mandel. "Other states got it instead."

Kay Loughrey, a program information specialist with the aging administration, said grant applications were ranked a second time after the judges got a chance to review the letters. "They went above and beyond what would be customarily done," she said. "They still did not rank high enough to be selected."

Mandel said the loss means the hotline won't continue with plans to expand statewide and won't be able to serve as many people in Northern California.

About two full-time staff positions will be lost along with other cuts in staff hours. Last year, about 7,200 people were given quick legal advice over the telephone and by e-mail, but that number may drop by 1,000 to 2,000 with the staff cuts this year, Mandel said.

Chisorom Okwuosa, legal services developer for the California Department of Aging, said state officials supported the hotline's grant application. The service is needed but the state's budget crisis means it is not in a position to step in and help. "There is a need to expand legal services as a whole," she said.

The hotline will emphasize help to Sacramento County seniors with funds provided by the Area 4 Agency on Aging. It offers legal advice on landlord and tenant disputes, foreclosures, consumer disputes and planning for long-term care, including Social Security issues.

The hotline also has special funds to help grandparents who are caring for their grandchildren in Sacramento, Placer, Yuba, Sutter, Yolo, Nevada and Sierra counties. Many grandparents need help on custody issues.

Earlier this year, the Senior Legal Services Task Force submitted a report to the state Legislature that supported a statewide senior legal hotline.

Mandel said the hotline is searching for private foundation funds to finance its expansion and may increase its efficiency with a new telephone system.

The Senior Legal Hotline can be reached at (916) 551-2140 or (800) 222-1753